NOT SO PLAIN AND MUCH TOO FANCY

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After a mid-winter try-out in Philadelphia the musical comedy "Plain and Fancy" has been playing in New York since January 27. It is still going strong and promises to continue for some time to come. As most **Eck** readers know, it deals with the Amish of Lancaster County. It has been reviewed with apoplectic approval by all New York critics save one or two. The **Eck** will have to join in the estimate of the more moderate minority.

The story is not much, but it is sufficient to set the trite theme of the show, which is city ways in conflict with country ways. We are here offered, however, the refreshing rusticity of the Plain People of Pennsylvania, set in contrast with the worldly world of fancy folk. Dan King is a New York magazine writer, whose grandfather was Joshua Koenig, an Amishman. Dan has inherited the family farm near Bird-in-Hand, and has received a letter from Jacob ("Papa") Yoder who wants to buy the place for his daughter Katie, whose marriage to Ezra Reber has been parentally arranged. But Katie is in love with Ezra's brother Peter, and Peter is in love with Katie. Peter, however, is a "violent fighting man," who, having been involved in a scrape or two, has been asked to leave the Amish community. Ezra, on the other hand, is a stolid strong-man, **persona grata** with the Amish, but not with Katie.

Dan King and his wise-cracking blonde girl-friend, Ruth Winters, have driven from New York to the Yoder farm to close Dan's deal with Jacob. They are in difficulty —Ruth especially, but also later Dan—from the moment they arrive. Ruth doesn't, and at first doesn't try to understand Amish ways. Besides Dan seems unaware of her love for him. Dan, on the other hand, remembering his Amish ancestry, is sympathetic towards and shows a real interest in the Amish people and their problems. In fact he takes so much interest in cute little Amish Hilda Miller that Ruth is led to sing one of the hits of the show — "It's a Helluva Way to Run a Love Affair." Dan's interest in Hilda leads her to think he has proposed to her. So on top of the Fancy-Plain conflict we have a quadrilateral boy-girl situation: Ruth-Dan; Hilda-Dan; Ezra-Katie, and Peter-Katie. It's really a three-fold affair, however, for in spite of their scheduled marriage, Ezra is hardly in love with Katie, nor is she at all in love with him.

Having heard of Katie's intended marriage to Ezra, Peter promptly returns to the Amish community. There, provoked by Ezra's taunts, he has a fight with his brother. Whereupon the barn on Dan's farm burns and Papa Yoder pronounces a "shunning" on Peter, who, according to Papa, has hexed the place. The whole community, even Katie, shuns Peter. To cap the climax, the day before the wedding Ruth unintentionally gets Ezra tight on "vegetable juice — **old** vegetable juice." In this condition he decides to have one last (also his first) fling at a carnival near Lancaster. Upon hearing where Ezra has gone, Peter, to protect Katie from disgrace, goes to the carnival to keep Ezra out of trouble. But he gets there too late and Ezra staggers home in drunken disrepute. Papa precipitously decides that Peter will make an acceptable Amish-man and son-in-law after all. The story closes with Dan handling a title to the farm to Peter. Dan persuades Hilda to marry an Amishman, he rediscovers Ruth, Katie gets Peter, and Peter gets the farm.

The story is half-skillfully developed by authors Joseph Stein and Will Glickman. The book is both good and bad — predominantly bad, for reasons soon to be set forth. The lyrics by Arnold Horwitt are neatly written and one especially (the almost hymn-like "Plain We Live") shows a genuine appreciation of several Amish virtues. The music by Albert Hague is passably tuneful, though lacking in smash-hit melodies. The music, moreover, is strictly and unnecessarily non-Amish and non-Dutch in its patterns. Singing and acting are creditably well done, notably that of Stefan Schnabel as Papa, Gloria Marlowe as Katie, Babara Cook as Hilda, David Daniels as Peter, and Richard Derr as Dan. Stefan Schnabel as a son of the late renowned pianist Arthur Schnabel and having trained at London's Old Vic and with Orson Welles, is of distinguished musical and theatrical background. He successfully resists what could be an easy inclination to overact the part of the firm Amish father. Richard Derr, a native of Norristown whose maternal

widder allrecht waar. Sei Daadi hett ihn uffkors completely gedrosche, wann der Mawny net so schier dod gewest waer. Der alt Mann waar froh, ass sei eenzicher Bu so glicklich darrich sei dumme Schtreech kumme iss mit seilem Baam, un hot em Mawny actually en fimf Daaler Note gewwe fer sei gut judgement in dem, ass er die Geil amme seefe distance ghatt hot dieweil ass der Baam seller Wagge flat versmaescht hot.

"Ya, mir kenne froh un dankbaar sei, ass des Ding so glicklich abgange iss," saagt die Mammi Bleischtee, wie sie aa em Mawny en fimf Daaler Note in die Hand gschlippt hot.

Die alde Leit hen gemeent der Mawny waer en wunnervoller schmauter Bu, un fer ihn zu pliese hot der alt Bleischtee en Latt Leit un die Bend hie grickt un hot der pole uffduh losse — der very Baam, wu der Mawny so en wunnerbaari Zeit mit ghatt hot.

"Gee whittigum, was hot seller Baam mich drum darrich die Luft gschnatt?" saagt der Mawny wie er als am Fenschder ghockt hot un hot der flag gewatscht, wu owwe am tip im Wind gflattert hot.

grandmother was Mennonite, seems to understand Amish life-ways and, moreover, acts a very vulnerable part with unaffected humility. His acting is the best in the show, which a Pennsylvanian might be permitted to suggest may be due to his early experience at the Hedgerow Theatre in the D-is-for-Dutch country.

Unfortunately one can not be as enthusiastic about the parts played by the girls. Shirl Conway is an attractive creature — or should one say comedienne? — but she has a sort of shovel-it-out style, characterized not in the least by an economy of means. She does manage to make jokes of inferior lines, however, and you can at least hear her in row P. She unfortunately has only one song sung all by herself, which is an ungenerous way to treat a gal who really Has It. Gloria Marlowe is the sweetest thing in the show and she acts her part well — she even walks Amish. It seems a shame she can't sing better. Barbara Cook as Hilda looks more Amish than Katie, but her role makes her too easily assimilable to non-Amish ways and she is a little too uninhibited, to say the least, for an Amish girl—for one even of the gayest variety.

One can hardly avoid having a pleasant time at Plain and Fancy but it must be reported that, in addition to the foregoing, the show has serious deficiencies, both as a production and as a play. The Helen Tamiris choreography, though exhibitionistically frenzied in parts, is vivid and colorful. Several of the dances, however, are fantastically inappropriate. **Variety**, in one of the most discerning reviews of the show, feels that "nothing could be more incongruous than singing and dancing in connection with the Amish." This is true at least for the type of dancing deployed for us in the Carnival Ballet in Act II, which even resorts to can-can. These sinuous scenes, though lively and lavish, are the brassiest brand of Broadway. They haven't the slightest significance from the standpoint of plot; they distract from the show's over-all atmosphere; and they stop the progress of the story for what seems like at least a quarter of an hour. In short, they spoil the show. A heroic operation is here necessary to rescue the show from grossly distorted showmanship. Nothing short of deletion of the carnival scenes in their entirety would succeed in lifting the level of the performance back to that of Act I. A reprise of "Plain We Live" might do the trick.

Another serious disqualification is the ineptness the authors display in trying to communicate in the Pennsylvania Dutch-English idiom of the Amish. The Amish know three languages, two of which they use in everyday speech. This is in curious contrast to the monotonous monosyllabism Messrs. Stein and Glickman ascribe to their subjects. Perhaps the script of a musical comedy isn't meant to be read, but it must be listened to, and what do we hear in this case? Thirty-eight (38) "yah's" and two "yeses" (why the two yeses?) and twenty-eight (28) "ain't's," the latter usually at the end of a question, or the word itself standing as its own all-sufficient interrogative. There are, moreover, over a dozen "once's," nearly as many "yet's," and too many "already's." This is hyperbole reduced to trivial travesty. Either Mr. Stein and Mr. Glickman were never in their lives in an Amish community, or they suffer a pathological insensitivity to many of the most obvious features of dialectic English.

According to the play's program the producers "gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance" of an informant, reportedly from the Dutch area, "without whose research . . . this show would not have been possible." Is it too brazen to suggest that the play could have immensely profited from just a little more "research?" For example, there probably never was an Amish girl named Hilda, nor an Amish boy named Ike. "Petersheim" exists as an uncommon Amish surname, but in the 250 years of Amish history in the New World there never has been an Amish family named "Pilersheim." In the song "Why Not Katie?" Amish Broders, Brands and Bretts are named, all of which are non-Amish family names. These names are no more Amish than are Glickman, Horwitt or Stein. Unless my ears deceived me, Reber was pronounced Reeber by Katie, who should know better, for the name is correctly spelled Raber and pronounced accordingly. The Amish costumes worn, especially by the men, are ridiculously inaccurate in almost every discernible detail. Moreover the Amish did **not** originate bundling, they have **no** hex signs on their barns, they **do** wear buttons on some of their clothes, they are **not** opposed to riding in automobiles, they are **not** teetotalers, and they do **not** shun people as portrayed in this play. There are several other serious inaccuracies I would be glad to catalogue if **Eck** readers should insist.

Aside from noting the fact that this musical comedy is both tuneful and funny, it is important to emphasize the finest quality one can claim for the show. It is the fact that the Amish are not made fun of — they are not here held up to ridicule. Jokes are usually at the expense of Ruth and Dan, the New York sophisticates, who should be able to take them. The serious lifeways to which the Amish are religiously committed, are here respected, at least in Act I. But basically the play employs a "Helluva Way" to introduce people to Plain People. Brooks Atkinson is right: "the finest folk material of the season" — for many a season — is here frittered away in Broadway banality. Yah, it aint so quaint, either. Already, yet, even once!